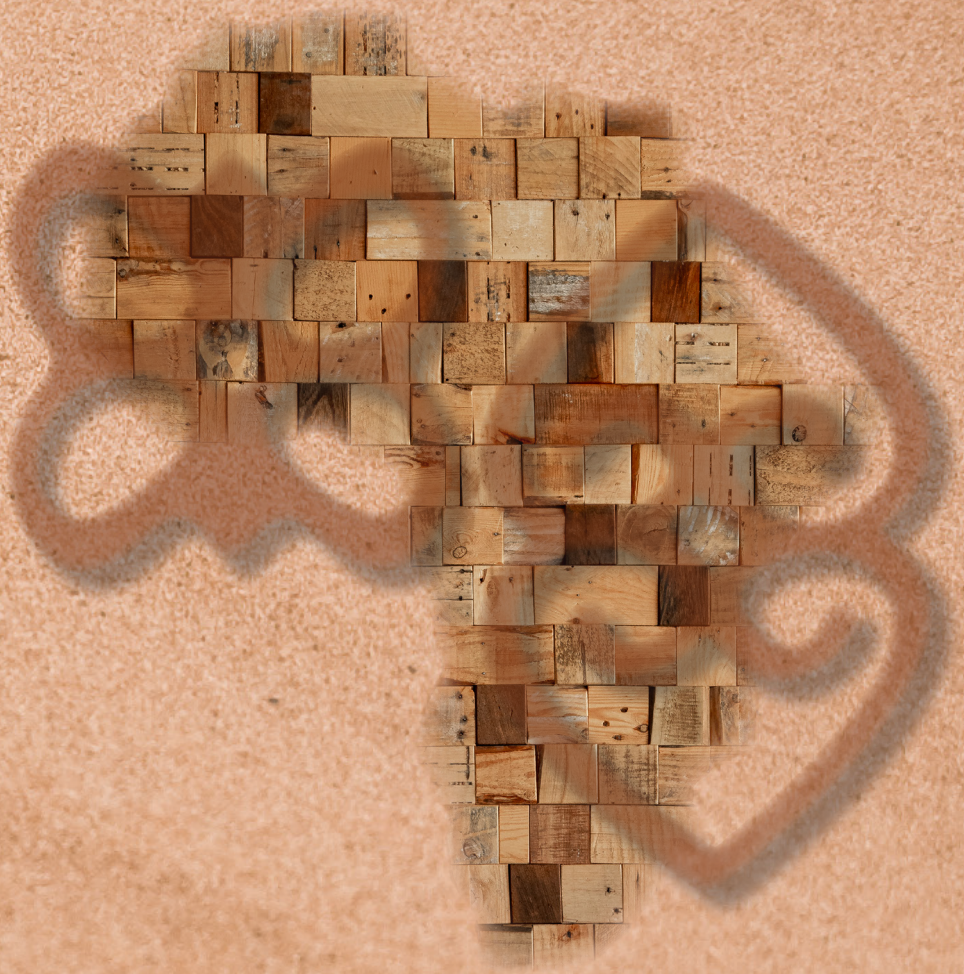
N Penxa Matholeni, GK Boateng & M Manyonganise (eds). 2020. Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS



EDITORS
Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni
Georgina Kwanima Boateng
Molly Manyonganise

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

N Penxa Matholeni, GK Boateng & M Manyonganise (eds). 2020. Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

1

KWANTONJANE

The indigenous rites of passage amongst amaXhosa in relation to prejudiced spaces

Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni[1]

Abstract

KwaNtonjane is an isiXhosa concept that refers to the space that a young umXhosa girl occupies from initiation to adulthood. During this time, she is called an *intonjane* – an initiate transitioning from girlhood to young womanhood. Some parallels can be drawn between the two initiation practices, *Kwantonjane* and *ulwaluko*, with the latter term referring to an initiation ritual for boys.

These rituals are similar yet distinct. To illustrate this point further, both male and female initiates receive counselling on their transition and society's expectations. Yet despite the similarities, there are also conspicuous differences in how the initiates are counselled and how much space they are allowed to occupy during and after the initiation process. For instance, on the one hand, the mother of the young man and the significant women in his life are not allowed to be a part of *ulwaluko* or in the spaces surrounding the ritual. On the other hand, the father of the young woman is allowed around and close to the girl's initiation hut. There seems to be prejudice regarding the ritual spaces that amaXhosa women in general are allowed to occupy. This chapter investigates how the location of unequal spaces sets the tone for future imbalance in ritual spaces and unequal social relationships. This will be addressed by making use of the relational indigenous research paradigm, which considers how reality is collectively constructed and the connection that people have with each other from birth to death. The chapter will also discuss and explain the purpose and meaning of these rites of passage.

Introduction and background

KwaNtonjane is the sacred space of amaXhosa, where the ritual is performed to prepare young girls for womanhood. This ritual seeks to teach a girl about the proper and important aspects of womanhood of umXhosa, preparing her for a life of marriage and the responsibilities and rights of being a wife, a mother and a leader.

1 Rev. Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni is a lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. [Email: nobuntu@sun.ac.za]

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

The *intonjane* ceremony (the initiation school for girls) has three segments, namely: *umngeno* (joining), *umtshatiso wentonjane* (slaughter of a cow), and the final stage, *umgidi* (welcoming home ceremony). Normally the ritual takes place after a girl has had her first period; however, the ritual can also be performed even if the woman has passed the stage of puberty. In fact, the first time I witnessed the ritual, it was my aunt who was in her late 30s. Moreover, Anele Mdoda (television personality) was recently seen shaving her hair for cultural initiation (ALL4WOMEN, 2014). This ritual is symbolic of a girl's sexual maturity and ability to conceive, as mentioned before; it is not just a symbol of sexual maturity and the ability to conceive, but the ritual is performed as needed, as indicated in the two illustrations above. However, Mills (1980) contends that if the woman is married and unable to conceive, or her children are sickly or face any other misfortune, the Sangoma might point the in-laws to the omission of the ritual by her father's household. The misfortunes not only happen to married women, but they can also affect the unmarried women with healthy children. That is why my aunt had to go through *KwaNtonjane*.

The *intonjane* ritual takes three to six weeks. Some parallels can be drawn between the two initiation practices for boys and girls. However, in *ulwaluko* the ritual takes four to six weeks. The *ulwaluko* ceremony also has three segments, namely: *umngeno*, *ukojiswa* and *umgidi*. This ritual also prepares the young man for manhood but is very different from the *intonjane*. *KwaNtonjane* is built in the proximity of *undlunkulu* (the main house) behind *ubuhlanti* (kraal). Inside *KwaNtonjane* there is a small space that is covered by a curtain which is where the *intonjane* will stay. The initiation school for the young man takes place in the bush, preferably in the mountains where there is ample space to allow sufficient privacy, because women are not allowed in his territory. A direct comparison of the two rituals reveals a number of similarities as well as differences. For instance, both initiates receive counselling on their transition and society's expectations. However, despite the similarities, there are also conspicuous differences, for example, between how they are counselled and how much space they are allowed to occupy during and after the initiation process. The question that arises is how does the location of unequal space set the tone for the future distribution of unequal spaces and unequal social relationships? This is the question this chapter seeks to address. This will be done using the relational indigenous research paradigm, which considers how reality is collectively constructed and the connection that people have with each other from birth to death, as well as the connection between the living and the dead. This chapter will also discuss, explain and theorise the purpose and meaning of these rites of passage.

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

N Penxa Matholeni, GK Boateng & M Manyonganise (eds). 2020. Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Methodology

The methodology of this chapter is inspired by the work of Professor Bagele Chilisa on indigenous methodologies, which has resonated strongly with me (Chilisa, 2012). First, I will locate myself within this study. Kovak (2010:110) asserts that self-locating entails cultural identification and "is a powerful tool for increasing awareness of power differentials in society and for taking action to further social justice". Nadar (2014) also confirms that narrative research calls on us to be reflexive about our positioning. Riessman (2008) takes one step further by acknowledging that the construction of any work always bears the marks of the person who created it. I position myself within Black South African culture. I am an umXhosa black woman. I grew up in the province known as the Eastern Cape, where women fetch water from the river early in the morning and early in the evening with their babies on their backs. Like many women and girls, I fetched wood from the mountains to make fire to boil water, cook, and warm our homes. As a young girl I did not go through *KwaNtonjane*, however, I witnessed it personally and was told many stories about this indigenous ritual.

Indigenous knowledge has a specific way of being passed on; it is an element of the oral tradition of sharing information and past experiences (Kovach, 2010). Chilisa (2012) argues that Western ways of doing research involve paradigms that are not always acknowledged (colonising epistemologies, methods and methodologies) cannot exist side by side in African culture. She thus asserts that indigenous languages can contribute to the advancement of new knowledge, concepts, theories, and techniques in research that are rooted in the community's ways of knowing and perceiving reality (based on the African paradigm).

Elabor-Idemudia (2002:230) confirms this when she says that "[i]f we fail to recognise the ways in which subjective factors such as race, class, and gender influence the construction of knowledge, we are unlikely to interrogate established knowledge which contributes to the oppression of marginalised and victimised groups". Cilliers (2018) acknowledges this when he states that local knowledges stand a better chance of resisting, totalising and normalising power, if only for the fact that they tend to be more transparent in their association with, and more self-conscious in, their use of power, and more open to being unmasked by the promptings of the aesthetic of freedom. Bruner (1990) argues that to make sense of the experiences of any individual is to cast it in narrative. Stories are data with soul, explains Nadar (2014). Kovach (2010) establishes that stories remind us of who we are and where we belong; they also hold knowledge within them. Elabor-Idemudia (2002:103) takes this further when she says that "oral forms of knowledge, such as ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folk tales and parables not only articulate a distinct cultural identity, but also

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

give voice to a range of cultural, social and political, aesthetic and linguistic systems – long muted by centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism". Chilisa (2012) believes that indigenous epistemology is viewed as knowledge that has a relationship with the people and has a place in the culture and the daily life experiences of the people. Moreton-Robinson (2017:72) brings this home when she says that relational principles "are a way of thinking, a way of learning, a way of storing knowledge, and a way of debating knowledge". This chapter seeks to do just that.

Similar yet distinct

AmaXhosa is one of those tribes that have many sacred rituals. They pride themselves on keeping and preserving these rituals. These rituals existed in precolonial times, and the arrival of the missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century opposed a number of amaXhosa rituals as pagan practices. Their converts were faced with exclusion from the church if they did not abstain from observance and/or participation in the rituals (Mills, 1980). *Kwantonjane* and *ulwaluko* were amongst the rituals that were repudiated; however, *ulwaluko* has stood the test of time right up to the democratic dispensation in South Africa.

KwaNtonjane, *efukwini*, *ukuzila* and *ulwaluko* are a few more examples of amaXhosa rituals. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I will only focus on *KwaNtonjane* and *ulwaluko*, in relation to the prejudiced spaces that are allocated to them by amaXhosa.

Ncaca (2014) asserts that amaXhosa initiation schools are institutions that seek to carve an identity. They consist of procedures and processes, such as religious and cultural rituals, that play an active role in identity formation. It is during these rituals that the lines are drawn between who one is as a person and where one belongs.

Both of the rituals in question have an element of space and time. It seems that time and space are allocated according to gender binaries. To illustrate this, both groups are located in a secluded area within a time frame of three or four to six weeks, depending on the clan. The *ulwaluko* space, as mentioned earlier, is completely secluded from the society, whereas the *KwaNtonjane* space is in the middle of the homestead, behind *undlunkulu* (the main house) and in front of *ubuhlanti* (kraal). Both groups of initiates are allocated guardians.

During the *umngeno* ceremonies, the initiates are to remove their clothes and wrap themselves in a blanket; this is done in private. The young man is given a white blanket with a red strip sewn on the edge of the blanket, which denotes the spilling of blood that will happen (Ncaca, 2014). In addition to being covered with a blanket, the young woman initiate is also given a *doekie* (headscarf) to cover her head and face.

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

The first seven days of both rituals are critical. During this time, the young man is not allowed to consume any liquids, because it is believed that this will hinder the healing of his penis after the foreskin is removed on the first day of initiation. The young woman, on the other hand, is allowed to eat or drink anything. The young man is allowed to have visitors, while the young woman is not allowed to be seen by anybody except her guardian.

During *umojiso*, which is a ceremony that takes place during the first seven days of the initiation, a sheep is slaughtered for the young man. The young initiate is only allowed to eat a certain part of the animal, which is fed to him by his guardian. After that, they are allowed to eat and drink anything without restriction. The similar ceremony for the young girl is called *umtshatiso*; it also takes place during the first seven days of the initiation. During *umtshatiso*, a cow is slaughtered. As in the case of the young man, the young woman is also fed a certain part of the animal by her guardian. At the end of both initiation schools, both groups of initiates receive counselling by members of their respective genders. There is no slaughtering of an animal during the *umphumo womkhwetha* (the end of initiation of a young man), but for the *intonjane* there is, and this celebration takes place over a number of days.

During the initiation school, the father of the young man and significant other men are present throughout the process. Only if absolutely necessary do they provide the mother with information, as the particularities of the process are strictly confidential. There is less secrecy around *KwaNtonjane*, since this ritual takes place in close proximity to the men's territory. The father of the young woman is able to see and observe what is going on, as the space is not entirely secluded. He is able to hear and enjoy the singing and dancing[2] that takes place every night outside the initiation hut. Cilliers (2016) notes that singing and dancing in African spirituality bring people to the rhythm of life. Music in African spirituality brings those who sing back to their origins; it gives meaning to the present and acknowledges the sacredness of the event. It is worth noting that in Africa there are no lines drawn between the sacred and secular.

The young village women sing and dance every night. Throughout this time the young woman initiate remains inside the initiation home. If she does go out, she is accompanied by her *impelesi* (guardian); they are then both covered with the same blanket, so that it cannot be seen who is who . The young man, on the other hand, experiences much more freedom; he is free to explore his natural surroundings and hunt because he has the land to himself. The emphasis on *ulwaluko* is on being an umXhosa man who will be in charge of talking to the ancestors on behalf of his

2 It is worth mentioning here that during singing and dancing, the emphasis is on putting the foot on the soil (Mndende, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

father's house (Ntombana, 2011) and officiating in ritual ceremonies (Ncaca, 2014). For the *intonjane*, the emphasis is on her beauty, how to please a man, what it means to have a menstrual period, and what her place in the household is.

However, in *ulwaluko*, the young man is instructed to shout "*Ndiyindoda!*" ("I am a man!") immediately after the removal of his foreskin. This declaration marks a significant shift in his social status. He is no longer an *inkwenkwe* (a boy), but also not yet an *indoda* (a man), which occurs only after the ritual is fully completed. The young woman, conversely, must cover her face, look down and be silent for a while. Furthermore, seclusion from society takes place in both rituals. The young man ventures off into the bush, preferably to the mountains, while the young woman's space is located in the home and around the kraal. This draws attention to the issue of space and freedom. The young man has much more physical space and freedom to move around naked, because no women are allowed in that space. The young woman's space behind the kraal, on the other hand, is much more limited as it is the man's territory; no women are allowed in the kraal. However, the father of the young woman and some men are allowed in the space of *KwaNtonjane*, because the location of the young woman's space is next to the man's territory.

Prejudiced spaces

"Spaces denote roles and relationships. Spaces can speak of privileges, authority, and power. Space separates the doers, the actors, from the audience, the 'in group' from those pushed out to the margins at the edge of the significant space so that they are at risk of having no place at all" (O'Loughlin, 2019:23). This quote speaks directly to the first part of Kobo's (2016) title of his article, *Umfazi akangeni ebuhlanti emzini*, meaning a woman is not allowed to enter the kraal. This dichotomisation of spaces by amaXhosa disconnects women from other spaces such as *ebuhlanti* in the initiation school for boys, etc., completely disempowering them. These prejudiced spaces violate the life of a child who is brought up in such a situation. Kobo (2016) further argues that power is a social structure in which some people are regarded as superior and have the right to exercise control over the lives of others by virtue of the position they hold within the structures of society. She further contends that power is not only limited to political structures, but is also found in the home, as well as at all levels of society and community.

In Cilliers's (2018) view, space and power go together. This is acknowledged by McFadden (2019), who states that space is gendered and highly politicised as a social resource in all societies. She further states that some spaces are culturally, religiously, and politically reserved for either males or females. To emphasise McFadden's point, in many isiXhosa-speaking church congregations, there is a side specifically for

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

N Penxa Matholeni, GK Boateng & M Manyonganise (eds). 2020. Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

women and a side specifically for men. Similarly, in each and every amaXhosa ritual there is a transparent wall separating the men and women on opposite sides. In the same manner, the *intonjane* and her *impelesi* have their faces covered; they are expected to keep their faces bent to the ground and speak softly when they talk. This is interesting because it is exactly what happens when the woman gets married. Her face is once again covered, and she is allocated a very limited space behind the door (literally). She also has *impelesi* with whom to go outside and she is expected to speak softly. The young man, on the contrary, is now a man with space and power.

The spaces where these rituals take place are symbolic of the power that privileges men. Kobo (2016) wondered about the life of a girl who is brought up in an environment where there are gender binaries, where she is told that her place is with her mother. The answer to this question is the beginning of a learning process for these girls. Penxa Matholeni (2019) calls this process "re-posturing", as they transition from one stage of life to another. Additionally, the girls must realise that they are inferior to boys and that these spaces are socially constructed.

Cekiso and Meyiwa (2015) concur that rites of passage, such as initiation and others, are performed to mark the transition from one stage of life to another, and to signify significant changes in the lives of individuals, while confirming their identity and status in the community. The status of the young man, therefore, is elevated. However, the status of a young woman is elevated in a private space; in other words, when she is married, she is expected to be a mother. My argument here is that an umXhosa woman has limited space, and therefore limited power, while the umXhosa man has unlimited power and the space to use that power.

Women are not allowed in *ebuhlanti*, which is a sacred space for amaXhosa; it is the place where the father or the first-born son speaks with the ancestors. Yet their initiation hut is built behind the sacred space; power is at play here. This means, even if the women are in charge of the *intonjane*, they do not own the space; the power is still in the hands of the father and the significant men in a young woman's life. There are spaces in the culture of amaXhosa that are more sacred than others are. These young women are unable to make this temporary space their home, because their space is limited. The young men, on the other hand, can make fires outside their *bhuma* and *boje inyama* (braai the meat).

The father of *intonjane* and some other men, as mentioned earlier, are permitted to walk around the girl's initiation hut, as well as go very close to it to choose a cow or goat to slaughter. Yet the mother of the young man and the significant women in his life are prohibited from the *ibhuma*. If she trespasses, she is deemed a witch and accused of wanting to bewitch the boys. For the young man, this boundary creates

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

the impression that women are inferior to men. The mother of the young man has no authority or power to make any decisions concerning the boy she carried in her womb for nine months.

Black women, particularly isiXhosa-speaking black women, have to undergo the process of what Samura (2017) calls remaking themselves. In this process, they renegotiate their expectations and aspirations to better fit into these limited spaces. In other words, they experience what Penxa Matholeni (2019) calls the migration of identities to increase their belongingness to fit the limited spaces they have occupied. They have to re-orient themselves, as Samura (2017) says, to take control of these small spaces.

No one really knows what is going on behind the closed door or curtain – perhaps nothing. Even though they are not harmed in any physical way, they are expected to stay there and remain silent. Gendron (2011) indicates that silence does not necessarily mean absence of verbal communication. She insightfully argues that stillness and silence are communication methods in themselves. Wajnryb (2001) further states that silence cannot be communicated. There is a mystery in this method of communication; when they look down with their mouths shut, they are indeed communicating with power. Silence can be used as a tool to deny the recognition of an experience or event (Gendron, 2011). Who said that because they are told not to speak, they are powerless?

Reposturing involves beautifying themselves for themselves and the spaces they occupy. *KwaNtonjane* is a beautiful thing to watch as they come out of the initiation school. Before the end of the girl's seclusion, a celebration begins for all the women in the village. This event is referred to as *umngqungqo*. During this event, women are dressed in *imibhaco* (amaXhosa traditional attire) – beautiful beaded necklaces and bracelets. In the morning, after the last day of *umngqungqo*, the initiate goes to the river to wash the white clay off, which is replaced with yellow clay, referred to as *umdike*. The initiate and her assistants wear new clothes upon their return from the river. The celebrations continue, marking the end of the *intonjane* ritual. The dress code of the women and the lyrics of their songs tell a story of resilience and power. They have wisdom to continue to re-posture themselves on their own terms, in different prejudiced spaces, and silently own the spaces of Mother Earth and Mother Africa.

Conclusion

In this chapter, particular attention was given to *KwaNtonjane* and *ulwaluko*, two very sacred amaXhosa rituals. It was argued that these treasured rituals, albeit deliberate, impart patriarchal tendencies and generate hierarchical and unequal

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

N Penxa Matholeni, GK Boateng & M Manyonganise (eds). 2020. Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

relationships of power, undermining the richness of amaXhosa culture. The rituals, along with their similarities and dissimilarities, exemplify the sacredness and aesthetics of amaXhosa rituals. Although a comparison of the two rituals was presented, the intention was not to highlight their common features and differences, but rather to expose and challenge the inherent gender binaries that are used to disadvantage women. These ritual spaces, as distinct and similar as they are, can be a compelling tool to emancipate young men and women to be responsible, equal members of their families, societies, and the nation at large. Unfortunately, as this chapter has shown, prejudice and power still prevail in these ritual spaces. Notwithstanding this limitation, the chapter endeavoured to reveal the resilience and transparent power of amaXhosa women, who have transcended these prejudiced spaces by means of their silence as a communication tool, which was initially intended to oppress them. But instead of remaining subjugated, they have managed to transcend their oppressive circumstances and turn their silence into their greatest weapon. At the very heart of these rituals is preparing young women and men for life and uniting them with their clan and community. These rituals therefore no doubt play a pivotal role in amaXhosa culture.

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

References

ALL4WOMEN. 2014. Anele Mdoda shaves hair for cultural initiation. 13 June. https://bit.ly/3fchDXY [Accessed April 2020].

Askland, H.H. & Bunn, M. 2018. Lived experiences of environmental change: Solastalgia, power and place. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 27:16-22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.02.003

Cekiso, M. & Meyiwa, T. 2015. Gendered naming and values inherent in the Xhosa *amakrwala* (graduate-initiates): Implications for teaching a multicultural class. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 40(1):75-82. https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2014.11893304

Chilisa, B. 2012. *Indigenous research methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Cilliers, J.H. 2016. *A space for grace: Towards an aesthetics of preaching*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media. https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920689940

Cilliers, J.H. 2018. Power, space, and knowledge: Theological perspective on Michel Foucault's contribution to Post-colonial theory. Paper presented at the Humboldt University Summer School on Postcolonial Theories as a Challenge for Theology. Berlin, 28 May–2 June.

Elabor-Idemudia, P. 2002. Participatory research: A tool in the production of knowledge in the development discourse. In: B. Chilisa (ed), *Indigenous research methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage. 97-231.

Gendron, R. 2011. The meanings of silence during conflict. *Journal of Conflictology*, 2(1):1-7. https://bit.ly/3eCuYIU

Kobo, F. 2016. *Umfazi akangeni ebuhlanti emzini* … A womanist dialogue with Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st century. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72(1):1-6. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3268

Kovach, M. 2010. *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McFadden, P. 2019. Why women's spaces are critical to feminist autonomy. *Isis International*. https://bit.ly/2Wwm9dm [Accessed November 2019].

Mills, W.G. 1980. Missionaries, Xhosa clergy & suppression of traditional customs. *International Journal of African Historical Studies, X111 'The Roots of African Nationalism in the Cape Colony: Temperance, 1866-98'*, 2:197-213. https://doi.org/10.2307/218873

Mndende, N. 2002. Signifying practices: AmaXhosa ritual speech. Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town.

Moreton-Robinson, A.M. 2017. Relationality: A key presupposition of an indigenous social research paradigm. In: C. Andersen & J. O'Brien (eds), *Sources and methods in indigenous studies*. New York: Routledge. 69-77.

Nadar, S. 2014. Stories are data with soul: Lessons from Black feminist epistemology. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 28(1):18-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2014.871838

Ncaca, M. 2014. *Yithi Uyindoda!* (Say, you are a man!): An ethnographic study on the construction of religion and masculinities in initiation schools in Cape Town Townships. Master's thesis, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch.

Ntombana, L. 2011. Should Xhosa male initiation be abolished? *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(6):631-640. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877911405755

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01

O'Loughlin, T. 2019. Space matters. *Liturgy*, 44(1):22-26.

Penxa Matholeni, N. 2019. *Endleleni*: A construction of the diasporic space for black women in South Africa. Unpublished.

Riessman, C.K. 2008. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage.

Samura, M. 2017. Remaking selves, repositioning selves, or remaking space: An examination of Asian American college students' processes of 'Belonging'. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(2):135-150. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0016

Wajnryb, R. 2001. *Silence: How tragedy shapes talk.* Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.

https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480730/01